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Dear Senator:

On behalf of the American Heart Association, the American Stroke Association, and its more than 30 million volunteers, I am writing to express our support for S. 3136 the Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016. This bipartisan bill strikes a reasonable balance between all interested parties while keeping nutrition standards and other programs strong and ultimately, protecting children's health. Moreover, it builds on the progress that we have made over the last several years.

While we strongly supported the original science-based nutrition standards for school meals, this bill reflects a common-sense compromise on sodium and whole grains standards. It allows schools that may have challenges with these particular nutrients more time and flexibility to meet the nutrition standards, while keeping the integrity of healthy school meals intact. This bill also makes kids' health a priority in many other ways. For example, it maintains the competitive foods standards and Community Eligibility Provision, and includes training and technical assistance, nutrition education programs, funding for school kitchen equipment, and funding for farm-to-school programs.

The policies in the bill takes direct aim at addressing the alarming health statistics facing our children. Today, one in three American kids and teenagers are overweight or obese, and our kids are developing what were once thought to be adult chronic diseases, including high blood pressure and diabetes. More than one in eight children ages 12-19 already have high blood pressure, or are at risk for developing it. Yet nine out of ten children are consuming too much salt. Clinical-based research indicates that as these children grow older, they have a much greater risk of developing and dying in adulthood from chronic disease, such as cardiovascular disease.

But all is not lost. We know that healthier children are more likely to become healthier adults, which means savings for government at all levels and greater productivity in the private sector. While healthy school meals are not a silver bullet, they play an increasingly important role in the fight against childhood obesity. Many children get 50 percent or more of their calories in school and that number grows daily. Making sure the foods we serve in school are nutritious is a key component in preventing chronic disease in our children and teaching them healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

We also know that the updated standards are working – 98.5 percent of schools are successfully meeting the criteria. What other government program has demonstrated that kind of success rate? Right now, kids are eating more fruits and vegetables than ever before and 72 percent of parents support the nutrition standards. By 2025, these

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healthy nutrition standards are estimated to decrease the number of childhood obesity cases by more than two million and lead to a cost savings of \$800 million.

Over the past few years, my staff has talked to more than 800 school food service staff, parents, teachers, and perhaps most important, the kids. What they found were innovative, dedicated staff, children who love eating healthy, and parents who are confident that the food their children get in school is nutritious. They do not want to see the clock turned back to the days when Congress designated pizza as a vegetable.

I visited an elementary school near our headquarters in Dallas, Texas, and the school nutrition program was amazing – and the food was delicious. The children couldn't get enough fruits and vegetables; the meal met the moderate amounts of sodium and whole grain requirements; and the parents and teachers were engaged in a comprehensive healthy school environment. Coupled with farm-to-school and a school garden, the children were also receiving a robust nutrition education. And this was a school where 98 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals – certainly not a school that has resources to spare. These kind of exemplary programs should serve as models for other programs across the country. And the policies in the Senate bill can be the catalyst to make that happen.

Children establish lifelong habits at an early age. Forming healthy nutrition habits when young can lead to better long-term health, which, in turn, is highly correlated with increased academic success in elementary and high school. Through healthy school meals, we are literally helping to set the table for healthy lives free of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Since its inception as a pilot program for school lunches under the Truman Administration, child nutrition reauthorization has always been a bipartisan issue. The American Heart Association strongly believes that any policy changes made to child nutrition statute must be based on science, free from politics, and are beneficial to our children's health. I am heartened that the Senate bill continues these time-honored traditions. I urge you to support S. 3136, the Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016. The stakes are too high to do anything less – the very health of our nation's children depends on it.

Sincerely,



Nancy Brown
Chief Executive Officer